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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 3480
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 0080
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1268
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ FEB LIMA 4913
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTIAGO 000228

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [CI](#)
SUBJECT: STILL DEAD: AUGUSTO PINOCHET, TWO MONTHS AFTER
THE FACT

REF: A. A) 06 SANTIAGO 2564
[1](#)B. B) 06 SANTIAGO 2544
[1](#)C. C) SANTIAGO 202

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Kelly for reasons 1.5 (b and d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The December 2006 death of Augusto Pinochet - seemingly a watershed moment in Chile's recent history - has faded remarkably quickly from public discourse. Feverish media commentary at the time - fed by juxtaposed images of still loyal supporters weeping while opponents popped champagne bottles - suggested, initially, that Chile was in for a long period of rancorous and divisive debate between left and right. Instead, Chile, now a thriving democracy with strong institutions, has apparently heaved an introspective sigh of relief over its past, and has moved on to the challenges of its present and future. End summary.

Dead and Gone

[1](#)2. (C) After the 1975 death of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, "Saturday Night Live's" Chevy Chase would regularly open his faux newscast with the observation that "Francisco Franco is still dead." In Chile, former dictator Augusto Pinochet, who died December 10, 2006, not only remains that way, he seems to almost have never existed. This is surprising given the outpouring of emotion that accompanied his passing (refs A and B), as supporters and detractors fought - thankfully largely figuratively - to define Pinochet's legacy.

[1](#)3. (C) For approximately ten days after his death, media coverage was intense, with all major newspapers and television outlets running retrospectives on Pinochet's life. These included exhaustive analyses of the rationale behind the 1973 coup, the accomplishments and failings of the regime during its 17-year run, and the long, somewhat tawdry, denouement to Pinochet's life, after he relinquished power in [1](#)1990. But since then, virtually, the silence of the grave.

14. (C) The intense - if short - debate over Pinochet's life and times revolved around three principal questions: 1) In toppling the Allende government, did he save Chile from something worse (than what he in turn imposed); 2) Did the market-oriented economic policies he implemented, many of which caused considerable hardship but which most agree laid the groundwork for Chile's current economic success, outweigh the negative of unquestioned human rights abuses; and 3) Do the allegations of corruption lodged against him and his family permanently mar his legacy, regardless of how the first two questions are answered?

15. (C) Clearly, where one stands on these matters depends on where one sits at the ideological table. Pinochet sympathizers - and they remain a significant segment of the populace - argued loudly that Allende had been leading Chile to chaos at best, a totalitarian nightmare at worst, with Pinochet a Cold War savior. In their view, one that carried considerable weight in the still moderately conservative major newspapers, Pinochet's opening of Chile's economy to the world was visionary, setting the country firmly on the path to stability and prosperity. Human rights abuses were regrettable, but forgivable in the context of a virtual civil war. Finally, allegations of corruption are unproven slander against a giant of history.

16. (C) For strong Pinochet detractors - who by most reliable estimates outnumber his backers - such talk is little more than Orwellian whitewash. They depict Pinochet as an unprincipled tyrant, who subverted the democratic order, betraying the very man who had given him his position. His economic policies were imposed by an iron hand, crushing labor rights, and causing considerable hardship for the poorest Chileans. Pinochet's abuse of human rights was untrammelled, setting the gold standard for similar abuses across the continent, throughout the seventies and eighties. And, on top of it all, he was a crook, who with his family stole millions of dollars from the Chilean people.

Death Warmed Over

17. (C) By Christmas 2006, however, that feverish discourse had seemingly played itself out. In recent discussions with Chileans as to why Pinochet has dropped off the screen, one telling comment was made by Rodrigo Novoa, executive director of a leading judicial studies center. Novoa, in his thirties and with little memory of the Pinochet years, leans right politically. He told the Ambassador that "for most Chileans, Pinochet died a long time ago." His boss, Estaban Tomic, an older man, and politically to Novoa's left, nodded agreement (Tomic was in exile during much of the Pinochet era and was former President Lagos' representative to the OAS).

18. (C) Tomic related that he was present when Patricio Aylwin was sworn in as President in 1990, promising to be president for all Chileans, "civilian and military." Hearing Aylwin extend that olive branch to the military (out of prudence or otherwise), Tomic said that he and Chileans across the ideological spectrum breathed a sigh of relief. It was clear even then that there was no desire to go back, neither by the left to the Allende years nor the right to a military regime. In the years since, the revelations of human rights abuses and corruption had contributed to what amounted to Pinochet's growing irrelevance. His physical passing had elicited, for most Chileans, little more than a second sigh of relief.

Whistling Past the Graveyard?

19. (C) With Pinochet now out of sight, the question is whether he is also out of mind and, if so, for how long. The example of Spain and of its grappling with the Franco legacy

could again prove illustrative. There are clear differences: Spain's civil war dragged on for nearly three years, ravaging the country and leaving exponentially many more thousands dead. Franco's dictatorship lasted more than twice as long as Pinochet's. But there are similarities as well - Cold War concerns, including an uneasy relationship with the U.S.; post-conflict human rights abuses; dictated (albeit successful) economic reforms. Yet it is only now, some 30 years after Franco's passing, that Spain is taking a painful, closer look at its past and, in doing so, putting what appears from media reporting here to be a significant strain on its social fabric. Are Chileans simply postponing a similar reckoning?

¶10. (C) Even if Chileans put off for a decade or two a determined examination of Pinochet's legacy, no serious harm will ensue. First, and without in any way diminishing the pain and suffering of the regime's victims, the number killed was significantly less (approximately 3,000) than what occurred in Spain, albeit not counting those tortured or made to suffer psychologically or otherwise (loss of family members, employment, social status). As the Ambassador noted in a recent visit to Villa Grimaldi, Pinochet's most notorious torture center, such practices should "never again" be tolerated, regardless of the ideological origin of the abuse (ref C). Nonetheless, the generational spread which defines the Spanish experience of war and remembrance is not present here.

¶11. (C) With the exception of the most fervent anti-Pinochistas, the majority of Chileans accept that the regime laid the groundwork for the economic growth and relative prosperity they enjoy today. They may argue passionately about the details and just how much credit Pinochet himself deserves, but they share the common assumption that there was some good done there. Other Pinochet-era achievements include a forcible breakup of a state educational monopoly that fostered the rapid growth of quality private universities. Pinochet also handled diplomatic relations with his neighbors skillfully, avoiding conflict with Argentina despite Chilean assistance to Great Britain during the Falklands War. He also with his fellow strongman in Bolivia, Hugo Banzer, made great strides towards resolving the issue of Bolivian access to the sea, failing only due to Peruvian objections.

Live and Learn

¶12. (C) If there is an immediate cautionary lesson for Chileans it lies in the curious coincidence that Pinochet's death came as the leftist Concertacion alliance which replaced him entered into its 17th year of governance -- the same number of years that Pinochet ruled. Even for his admirers, Pinochet's star dimmed as he lingered in power and, when he finally did step down, allegations of corruption tarnished him further. While it may be too early to say if the Concertacion is suffering from similar fatigue, it has been buffeted over the past year by charges of corruption of its own.

¶13. (C) For the U.S., the mature response of Chilean democracy to Pinochet's passing is certainly welcome, evidence that the polarization of Chilean politics is a thing of the past. While there remains a strong right with loyalties to Pinochet, and a smallish hard-core left that would like to see some on the right painted as Pinochet collaborators, the moderate center largely holds sway. Chileans, at least for today, seem determined not to spend much time looking back or in excessive introspection. This complements our own agenda with the GOC, one which encourages regional leadership, outward-oriented thinking, and a focus on the future.

KELLY